

Joseph Nechvatal

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In *On the Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky writes both about the inner necessity of the artist and about the audience learning to look at pictures not only from the outside, but to *enter* them and move around in them. That is the inner immersive perspective of imagination that has come to shape my approach to an art theory that addresses the influence of the viral form.

Please allow me to introduce myself with a drawing I made in 1985 called *The Spiritual Life*.



The Spiritual Life

Joseph Nechvatal, 1985

Drawing, 11" x 14", graphite on paper

In the collection of South Dakota Art Museum, South Dakota State University

When I look back at it, I recognize a punk-ironic artist engaged, none-the-less, in re-introducing some kind of subversive, but uplifting, spiritual twist back into contemporary art.

Over the ensuing 26 years, my relationship to the spiritual has increased with my immersion into the virtual. The virtual was first inaugurated into my work in 86, and I

have worked ever since on—and with—electronic visual information, computers and computer-robotics. From 91 to 93 I was artist-in-resident at the Louis Pasteur Atelier and the Saline Royale/Ledoux Foundation's computer lab in Arbois, France. There, I developed my *Computer Virus Project*: an experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. In 2002, I extended that artistic research into the field of artificial life through my collaboration with the programmer Stéphane Sikora. That continues to this day.

In the last 10 years, my computer-robotic assisted paintings and a-life animations have pictured an electronic-viral-spirit that feeds off the colors of phantasmagorical digital hosts—hosts made up of an excessive concoction of ambiguous sexual body parts morphed from both sexes. This hermaphroditic (perhaps pagan-like) spirituality, for me, brings a subversive involvement to computational media by presenting a poignant phantasmal consciousness that challenges contemporary concerns regarding objectivity, safety, truth, and identity.

Ideas of immersive phantasmal consciousness were first introduced to me during my reading of the machinic-media-ecology-philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari as I served as conference coordinator for the 1st International CAiiA Research Conference entitled *Consciousness Reframed: Art and Consciousness in the Post-Biological Era* held in July 1997. This conference looked at new developments in virtual reality, art, science, technology and consciousness. There I interacted closely on these subjects with Roy Ascott, Victoria Vesna and Bill Seaman. Virtual-spiritual considerations in this context appear in my book of essays *Towards an Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality (1993-2006)* published by Edgewise Press in 2009. In 2011, my new book *Immersion Into Noise* will be published by University of Michigan in conjunction with Open Humanities Press.

Through contemporary work on immersion, noise, neuro-science, electronics and image forensics, I believe we have a fuller understanding of art's importance as a sign of transcendence and its power to generate spiritual feelings in a meta-religious context. That is what I hope to further explore with my fellow panelists as we move beyond Kandinsky.